

A Book Review: *From Writing to Composing: An Introductory Composition Course 2nd Edition*

By Beverly Ingram and Carol King
Cambridge University Press, 2004, 162 pp., ISBN: 978-0521539142

Reviewed by Lydia Leung, Asia University

Abstract

This review argues that *From Writing to Composing: An Introductory Composition Course 2nd Edition* by Beverly Ingram and Carol King could serve as a bridge for Freshman students wishing to explore pre-academic writing at Asia University. In the first section, a basic overview is covered followed by the strengths and limitations of the coursebook. The next section is a set of 10 evaluative statements that are applied for further insight into the writing activities. In the final section, the author concludes by discussing how well the coursebook has met the evaluative statements and whether this coursebook is recommended.

Basic Overview

From Writing to Composing: An Introductory Composition Course 2nd Edition is an introduction to the organization and structure of formal composition writing appropriate for high beginner to low intermediate students. It has a two-part structure which first introduces various genres of writing followed by different modes of rhetorical organization in paragraph building. This eventually culminates in the basics of writing a final essay. The authors' primary aim is to transition the writer from structured guided writing activities to freer composing ones that use a multi-draft approach through language awareness-raising exercises coupled with implicit grammar and vocabulary practice. The use of simple computer skills is also encouraged to familiarize students with publishing their own works and motivate the learner to write increasingly more. A closer analysis will indicate that this coursebook provides students with a basic foundation towards formal essay development and serves as a bridge to further explore the world of pre-academic writing.

The book is divided into a two-part structure comprised of fourteen units, organized around topics such as people, places or instructions for writing paragraphs. Part One, *Getting Started*, introduces the different genres of writing such as letter writing, formal writing, and narrative and supplies students with the technicalities of writing. Part Two, *Writing More, Writing Better*, teaches different modes of rhetorical organization including enumeration, classification, and chronological order. Each unit in this part demonstrates how to develop a paragraph in some form including describing steps in a process, using statistics to provide supporting details, reporting an experience, classifying items, listing reasons, citing examples and describing actions in chronological order. Each unit has three to eight sections with several consistent main activities throughout the book including the following: independent-practice portfolio writing, revising and editing and dictation exercises. There are four publication projects from writing how-to-guides, holding an info expo to creating a portrait gallery of special people. It includes a mini-handbook containing explanations and exercises, script for teachers, guide to the portfolio project and list of editing symbols in the appendices.

Strengths

There are several engaging features of the book. The primary one is that the book implements technology in every unit. Students are encouraged to write, revise and edit on the computer to develop competence in keyboarding, take advantage of computer tools and use e-mail and the Internet comfortably. In an increasingly computer-dependent world it is essential for students to familiarize themselves with enough technological skills to allow them to

create and publish their work. Using the computer develops and enhances writing skills and researching on the internet motivates learners to learn by themselves. The use of e-texts with ESL learners in the form of technology in reading and writing in the classroom increases learner motivation and achievement (Meskill & Mossop, 2000).

The second commendable feature is the portfolio project. Students keep a folder with a collection of their weekly guided-practice portfolio assignment and independent-practice portfolio assignments. Formative assessment is done through these portfolios when they are submitted to the teacher for evaluative feedback or revisions. Students can keep improving their performance on the same task under formative assessments (Morgan et al, 2004) as repetition and reinforcement builds writing fluency. The purpose of the independent-practice portfolio assignments is for students to use their language and vocabulary to clearly communicate their ideas, and in the process build fluency and efficiency in writing.

The third noteworthy feature is the emphasis on employing higher-order thinking skills to apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. By applying Anderson & Krathwohl's (2001) taxonomy for learning, it enables students to engage in a deeper learning experience. Students are given ample opportunities to use one or more of these skills in the guided writing assignments or class publication projects. The application of higher-order thinking skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) are interweaved with activities that raise language awareness with grammar being approached incidentally.

There is flexibility for teachers using this book. They may select materials appropriate to learners' expressed needs as Prevedel (2003) mentions the importance of student engagement with the materials. Students are encouraged to complete all of Part One as it is designed to be a vital component in establishing a strong foundation for an effective writing course. Ideally, all of Part Two should be completed as well; however, given constraints in time and needs of particular classes and students, a shorter course could be recommended. It is also not necessary to finish one unit completely before moving on if students are ready to begin the next unit of guided practice activities while still revising and editing a composition from a previous unit.

Limitations

There are also a few noticeable drawbacks of the book including the lack of peer feedback. More opportunities could be created for students to critique each other's independent writings rather than having the teacher solely responsible for giving each individual comments. Peer feedback for correcting assignments through a student-centered environment benefits the learners by extending their academic-style writing practice (Coit,

2004). Berridge (2009) also notes that “reading one’s own work and the work of others is a vital part of the writing process, and allows for the readers to formulate alternative thoughts and perspectives from already existing perspectives and norms that they may have” (p. 12).

Another potential drawback is a lack of self-reflection after each unit or project. The role of self-reflection should deserve more attention and is not addressed in the independent-practice portfolio writing until the last two units of the book. Although weekly writing assignments are collected in a portfolio only a few are in the form of reflective questions such as success or problems with the assignment, feelings about your writing progress or a favorite composition so far in the course. Nunan (2004) states that, “research suggests that learners who are aware of the strategies driving their learning will be better learners” (p.38). Students are encouraged to share knowledge and discuss information with their classmates but are not required to reflect on what they have learnt themselves on a regular basis.

Other minor yet important aspect missing from the book is the role of affective engagement or a learner’s emotional connection to what they are learning. Aside from minimal visuals in each unit, it is unlikely that topics such as perfect routines, portraits of special people and class statistics would evoke the emotions. Affective engagement is essential for effective and durable learning which includes emotional involvement (Tomlinson, 2003). In addition, much of the content and text is centered-around the U.S. but hardly reflects people’s experiences from other countries. If culture is the expression of beliefs and values, and language the embodiment of cultural identity, then language needs to take account the way in which it expresses cultural meanings (Pulverness, 2003).

Evaluation of the Coursebook

There are 10 evaluative statements that are considered important in the selection of materials (Tomlinson, 2003) with rationale. Each statement concludes with a brief comment to show how well it has fulfilled each one.

1. The coursebook involves technology to support language learning.

In a computer-dependent world, it is critical for learners to familiarize themselves with the basics of technology because of the impact on writing. The use of e-texts with ESL learners incorporating some form of technology in reading and writing in the classroom increases learner motivation and achievement (Meskill & Mossop, 2000). All the units incorporate the use of the computer to send an e-mail or type, revise and edit a paragraph.

2. The coursebook incorporates activities for raising language awareness.

Bolitho (2003) argues that a good activity will generate one or more cognitive processes such as “analyzing, analogizing, applying existing knowledge to new contexts, revising...” (p. 424). Every unit has exercises to bring learners’ awareness of two or more cognitive processes.

3. The coursebook employs activities using a variety of learning strategies.

Equipping learners with the appropriate strategies enables them to have a greater control of their learning which include cognitive, interpersonal, linguistic and affective strategies (Nunan, 2004). Self-evaluation as a learning strategy is neglected in the independent writing assignments.

4. The coursebook deals with grammar incidentally rather than isolated items.

Widdowson (1990) views grammar as a means of mediating between words and contexts for the purpose of achieving meaning. Coursebooks should focus on meaning instead of forms to develop grammatical competence. Grammar is encountered simultaneously rather than sequentially in the text. Through repeated exposure and practice in writing, students gain control of the different grammar tenses.

5. The vocabulary is recycled throughout the coursebook.

According to Nunan (2004), “recycling language maximizes opportunities for learning and activates the ‘organic’ learning principle” (p. 36). Unfortunately, there is no indication that vocabulary is being recycled throughout the coursebook.

6. The coursebook requires learners to develop their critical thinking abilities.

It is crucial that critical thinking is required of the learning such as analyzing, applying, evaluating and creating. Activities in the coursebook should develop learners’ abilities to utilize what are called ‘higher-order thinking skills’ (Anderson & Kratwohl, 2001). Students are not only required to identify certain parts of a paragraph but they also need to give reasons for their answers, compare similarities and differences or how to improve a paragraph.

7. The coursebook provides opportunities for peer evaluation.

It is important for learners to evaluate each other's work to make continual improvements in their writing. Peer feedback for correcting assignments through a student-centered environment benefits the learners by extending their academic-style writing practice (Coit, 2004). There are two chapters that require editing feedback on guided activities.

8. The coursebook provides opportunities for cultural awareness.

Pulverness (2003) asserts that the cultural experiences of L2 learners should be reflected in the materials so they may identify with the text and link it to their personal lives. Regrettably, most of the topics in the coursebook surround the U.S. Although the names used are of different countries, people's experiences are not reflected in the texts.

9. The coursebook has activities that expose learners to authentic use in language.

According to Nunan (2004), written texts and dialogues for pedagogical purposes fail to adequately prepare learners to cope with the language they hear and read in the real world outside of the classroom. It is essential that the coursebook exhibit authentic written input for students to develop communicative competence. There could be more opportunities to show learners actual projects or published works other students have accomplished as only two units demonstrated this.

10. The coursebook is affectively engaging to the learners.

It is important that learners find the materials emotionally engaging whether it is the topics, activities or projects involved. Tomlinson (2003) states that "affective engagement is...essential for effective and durable learning" (p.19) which means including emotional involvement. Minimal visuals are used for each unit and the topic of the units such as perfect routines, portraits of special people and class statistics hardly evoke the emotions.

Conclusion

Overall, *From Writing to Composing*, is appropriate for Freshman students at Asia University as it helps them build a solid foundation on the basics of writing before pursuing more difficult tasks in academic writing. The strengths of this coursebook include using technology, building a portfolio, applying higher order thinking skills and selecting appropriate materials. However, the drawbacks include a lack of peer feedback, self-reflection and affective engagement. Although this coursebook has met evaluative statements 1-7 to a high degree, the points mentioned in evaluative statements 8-10 could be further

improved. Nevertheless, instructors who are teaching general writing at CEFR Levels A1-A2 will find this book to be a useful addition to their library.

References

- Anderson, Lorin. W. & Krathwohl, David R. (Eds.). (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: a revision of bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Pearson Education.
- Bolitho, Rod. (2003). Materials for language awareness. In Brian Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (pp. 422-425). Continuum.
- Coit, Caroline. (2004). Peer review in an online college writing course, Proceedings of the IEEE international conference on advanced learning technologies, 902-903.
<http://www.computer.org/portal/web/csdl/abs/proceedings/icalt/2004/2181/00/21810902abs.htm>
- Ingram, Beverly & King, Carol. (2004). *From writing to composing: An introductory composition course (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge UP.
- Meskill, Carla & Mossop, Jonathan. (2000). Electronic texts in ESOL classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(3), 585-592.
- Morgan, Chris; Dunn, Lee; Parry, Sharon; & O'Reilly, Meg. (2004). *Issues and themes in assessment*. Routledge Falmer.
- Nunan, David. (2004). *Task-Based Language Teaching*. Cambridge UP.
- Prevedel, Amy. (2003, September). Values and beliefs: The world view behind curriculum. *Focus on Basics*, 6(C). <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=190>
- Pulverness, Alan. (2003). Materials for cultural awareness. In Brian Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (pp. 426-438). Continuum.
- Tomlinson, Brian. (Ed.). (2003). *Developing materials for language teaching*. Continuum.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1990). *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford UP.